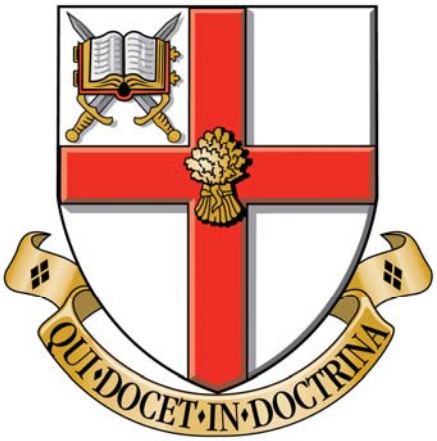

University of Chester

JAZZ ON THE BORDER: JAZZ AND DANCE BANDS IN CHESTER AND NORTH WALES IN THE MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author

Abstract

There was a high degree of overlap between western popular music and jazz in the mid-twentieth century. However, histories of jazz and histories of popular music are often puzzlingly separate, as if separated by strict borders. This article looks at some of the reasons for this (including those proposed by Frith (Frith, 2007) and Bennett (Bennett, 2013). The importance of musical pathways and hidden histories ((Becker, 2002; Brocken, 2010; Finnegan, 2007)) in the context of local music scenes are considered. The importance of taking live music scenes and provincial areas into account when discussing genre histories is discussed, in the context of examples from an enthnographic study of dance band musicians and promoters in the Chester (UK) area. These examples help to demonstrate that boundaries between jazz and popular music are frequently less abrupt in practice than they are in theory.

Introduction

The city of Chester is on the border between England and Wales, its strategic location having been picked out by the Romans nearly two thousand years ago. Although the port silted up, giving way to Liverpool, Chester has been an important garrison town ever since, and never more so than in the years around World War II. I have focussed on the dance band and jazz scene that evolved the Chester area in that period. The research is based on interviews with musicians and others who were involved in the Chester dance band scene, as well as photographs, radio interviews, and locally made recordings. This ethnographic approach has given a 'player's-eye view' of the local dance band scene, and how the local network of musicians, bandleaders and promoters operated.

Explaining Wilf

"The secret of success is constancy of purpose."
Benjamin Disraeli, quoted in Wilf Field's engagement diary (Field, 2006)

Wilf Field was a musician who played in and around Chester from the 1930s to the 1980s. Field's son Gordon contributed a large amount of material covering Field's long career as a musician and bandleader in the area. Field's playing career lasted just short of seventy-five years, and was eventually ended by health problems and accidents:-

"me dad wanted to play up to 2000, started 1925 and wanted to make it 2000 which was 75 years of playing. […] So he got to the 74 year and 75 would have been, and in the January I fell and broke a bone in the foot and me dad cancelled a couple of meetings got booked for then, and I got the all clear to say I could play [drums] again, wanted to go back to work, I went round to see me dad and found him behind the door. He'd fallen and damaged his pelvis and never really got over that. They're not sure why, he had to go back into hospital and died there unfortunately." (Field, 2006)

Above: Wilf Field and His Collegians at Clemences Restaurant, Chester, in 1937 (at 2:20 a.m. – packing up). l-r: Harold Rimmer (drums), Arthur Bailey (trumpet), Wilf Field (piano), unknown (sax), McDonald (sax), Jack Vickers (bass). Photo from Gordon Field

If Field had lived in a city with a more established musical reputation, it might arguably have been less necessary to do a new ethnographic study to discover details about how the local music scene worked. London and Liverpool, for instance, are both strongly associated with bands and artists who recorded or broadcast regularly, made a full-time living from music, and in many cases made noteworthy achievements in artistic or technological innovation, or commercial success (or in some cases, such as the Beatles, all three). A town or city associated with such artists is liable to be mentioned in major histories of relevant genres, and to have its wider musical life examined in more detail than would have otherwise have been the case. However, Field lived in Chester, which is well-known for its Roman ruins, but has rarely been brought to wider public notice in histories of music of any genre. This makes Field's long and busy musical career in the area all the more intriguing. Seeking an explanation for the long-term local success of Field and others like him forms the basis of the research reported in this article.

Jazz on the Border

Border or Interface?

'border, n.

1. A side, edge, brink, or margin; a limit, or boundary; the part of anything lying along its boundary or outline.

2. a. The district lying along the edge of a country or territory, a frontier; pl. the marches, the border districts.

b. The boundary line which separates one country from another, the frontier line. on the border: on or close to this line, on either side; hence, in the border district. on the borders of (Wales): close to, the frontier of (Wales). over the border: across the frontier line.'

(Oxford English Dictionary) (Anon., 2013a)

The city of Chester is close to the physical and political border between England and Wales, which itself provides a good example of a clearly delineated physical boundary with legal, governmental and historical significance. The Welsh/English border in its current form is represented by a single unbroken line on maps of the UK, running roughly North to South from Chester to Chepstow, with numerous deviations East and West along the way to accommodate natural features and the results of historical conflicts and treaties. Wales is part of the United Kingdom, but retains its own Celtic-influenced culture and language, along with partial self-government by national assembly.

As the Oxford English Dictionary entry implies, borders are clear dividing lines between one piece of territory and another. They form frontiers, and serve to separate the people, places or things which lie on either side. Where there is disagreement over the exact location of the border, or competition for what lies on one side or the other, borders may be defended (or attacked) aggressively by those who identify with and occupy the abutting territories. Clearly defined and mutually agreed borders do have their benefits, allowing the occupants to concentrate on constructive activities within their own areas, rather than constantly replaying old arguments over ownership or citizenship. There are times when lines on the map can imply more distinct political and cultural differences than actually exist among the people on the ground though. It is -

happily - a very long time since territorial disputes between Wales and England have erupted into physical violence, and it is possible in many places to cross the national border without knowing you've done so; apart from a few road signs or public artworks near major roads, the border is usually invisible on the ground.

Borders and territories aren't always tangible physical objects of course. In order to have a meaningful discussion about two different styles of art, for instance, it helps to be able to define clearly what one style *is*, that the other *isn't*[1]. As with physical borders, this process has both drawbacks and advantages. Clear boundaries help reduce the temptation to bicker about the location of the boundary, but on the other hand people can become almost as aggressive in their support for the ideas and styles as they can about their physical territory (especially if the political idea or artistic style is identified with their physical territory - a particularly incendiary combination).

Jazz history and popular music history (usually meaning rock history) are often studied as if they were two separate territories with a clear and unequivocal border between them. However, like the line on the map separating Wales and England, the reality on the ground is more complex. I therefore suggest that the concept of an interface might be more appropriate.

'interface, n.

1. A surface lying between two portions of matter or space, and forming their common boundary.

2. a. A means or place of interaction between two systems, organizations, etc.; a meeting-point or common ground between two parties, systems, or disciplines; also, interaction, liaison, dialogue.

b. (An) apparatus designed to connect two scientific instruments, devices, etc., so that they can be operated jointly.'

(Oxford English Dictionary) (Anon., 2013b)

[1] There are occasions when it helps to have clear definitions of musical borders for both analytical and practical purposes. For instance, a shared understanding of what is meant by 'Trad Jazz' or 'Rock 'n' Roll' would be as essential to bandleaders advertising for musicians as it would to musicologists doing a comparative analysis of examples of the styles concerned. However, that is a long way from saying that once a musician has played on the Trad side of the border, they will never be seen playing Rock 'n' Roll.

Like a border, an interface is associated with the common boundary between two different spaces, but unlike a boundary the role of an interface is more to enable traffic across the boundary than to prevent it, and the nature of that boundary is often much less hard-edged. Technologists are used to needing to think in terms of providing interfaces between otherwise separate pieces of technology, for instance by providing them with a common language or mechanism which both can work with effectively.[2] This analogy works well with the example of people living either side of the Welsh/English border who keep their own national identities while still regularly crossing the physical border for work and social purposes. The real life interfaces between Wales and England are much less solid and immutable than the line on the map might suggest. Similarly, the strict boundary between jazz and popular / rock music, despite its theoretical usefulness, is often much less visible in life than it is in theory, as will be illustrated in the next section.

Jazz, Dance Bands and Popular Music

"Popular music" in the Western world from the end of the first world war to just after the second world war *was* jazz – or at least it was strongly influenced by jazz styles of playing, or played by musicians who also knew how to play jazz. However, histories of jazz and histories of popular music are often puzzlingly separate conceptual territories. It is useful to consider why this might be. Frith (Frith, 2007) and Bennett (Bennett, 2013) suggest some possible answers, at least as far as academic studies of jazz and popular music are concerned. Bennett points out that:-

'As a fledgling academic discipline in the late 1970s, popular music studies established a series of criteria for the study and appropriation of popular music texts that saw it become entrenched in a succession of discussions and debates centring upon the political and aesthetic significance of popular music - the latter also ensuring that popular music studies became largely fixated around

[2] A good, if somewhat outdated, example would the dial-up modem used to connect a digital computer to the internet via an analogue telephone network. The computer can only process digital data, and the analogue network can only process analogue data. The modem allows the two distinctly different entities to work together by translating the 'language' of one into something

ostensibly more political genres, such as hard rock, punk and, latterly, rap and dance. This was achieved at the expense of any sustained discussion of other genres more associated by academic researchers with mainstream rock and pop.'

(Bennett, 2013)

If scholars of popular music tended to avoid the contemporary mainstream, they were even less inclined to examine the mainstream popular music of earlier eras, such as jazz. Frith (Frith, 2007) notes that in *Popular Music* (the field's most important academic journal), in the proceedings of the biennial conferences of IASPM (the International Association for the Study of Popular Music), and in textbooks aimed at undergraduates on popular music courses, popular music very quickly became equated with rock music (or with music influenced one way or another by rock). This equation reflected the influence of cultural studies on popular music research, with results including an emphasis on the consumers and uses and extra-musical aspects of pop music (rather than the musicians and their intentions), a preference for the immediate and the fashionable over history and tradition, along with a valorisation of youth, a populist suspicion of 'art' or 'excellence', and equation of commercial success with popularity and influence.

Frith sums up the resulting situation thus:-

'These developments—popular music equated with rock, the influence of cultural studies on how rock was studied—help explain the third reason why jazz did not become part of the popular music field: jazz scholars had no interest in playing on it! … And the reason why jazz scholars were not interested in being seen as popular music scholars was because jazz by then had clearly been defined against rock.'
(Frith, 2007) pp11-12

So popular music writers tended to avoid jazz because it wasn't popular (or political) enough, and jazz writers tended to avoid popular music because it was

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understood by the other, and vice versa, adding to the capabilities of both without threatening the integrity of either.

too popular, or too political, or at any rate not sufficiently focussed on instrumental skill and relationship to tradition. This is understandable when looked at from the point of view of the individuals and organisations concerned, but one consequence has been a tendency, until recently, for whole genres and musical scenes to drop through the gaps between the scholarly camps.

Negus (Negus, 2004) (P139) discusses the problems caused by 'approaching musical genres as if they were living bodies which are born, grow and decay' – for example, the often narrated idea of the rock era as 'born around 1956 with Elvis Presley, peaking around 1967 with Sgt Pepper, dying around 1976 with The Sex Pistols' (Frith, 1988). He states that as well as presenting the genre unrealistically as a single unified body, this approach privileges fans or musicians who happen to have been active during the period in question. It also leaves important questions unanswered about exactly what defines a given genre as unequivocally dead, officially signalling the end of that era – as well as what happens if people persist in playing or listening to it after that date. Negus's view is that the idea of a 'rock era' 'is based on a particular experience of rock (biographical, geographical, generational and social) which fails to allow for how musical forms are transformed and move on in different ways across the planet'.

My evidence shows that there was a healthy live music scene in Chester in the 1950s of which the dance band musicians interviewed for this study were a part, and judging by the evidence of the interviews and photographs, it was still there well into the late 1960s and beyond, even after dance bands and ballroom dancing had long since ceased to be the fashionable thing among the younger generation. Again this is something which Negus would recognise. Referring to Dave Harker's essay in "Cultural Revolution? The challenge of the arts in the 1960s" (Harker, 1992), Negus writes:-

'..during the peak of the rock era, the top-selling albums included the film soundtrack The Sound of Music, classical recordings such as Carlos and Folkman's Switched on Bach, Van Cliburn's performance of Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1 and the easy listening soul of Johnny Mathis Greatest Hits. […] for many people the defining sound of this era was not rock.'
(Negus, 2004, p. 148)

A similar phenomenon was observed in previous eras as well; urban America during the Jazz Age and Swing Era was not dominated by jazz and swing to the exclusion of all other styles, because audiences continued to want to hear and dance to other styles. The sociologist Howard Becker worked as a jazz pianist while studying in Chicago in the 1940s and '50s. In 2002[3] he reflected on these experiences[4] (Becker, 2002) and what they implied about how live jazz in those days came to be performed and paid for, particularly in the majority of venues - such as bars or private parties - where listening to the jazz was not the primary focus for the management or the customers. He pointed out that 'every art work has to be someplace', and this applies as much to jazz performances as to paintings or theatre. For at least the first three or four decades of its existence, jazz was mainly played in bars, night clubs and dance halls, where most of the money which kept the venues - and therefore the bands - in business came from the sale of alcohol, with entry ticket fees making a relatively small contribution.

The music that Becker and his colleagues played in Chicago varied with the class, age and ethnicity of the clientele, and a band which frequently provided music for wedding parties needed to be able to play 'O Sole Mio' for Italian weddings, polkas for their Polish equivalents, and so on as appropriate for other nationalities and occasions. It was rare for a band to play 'straight' jazz songs, as the general public preferred tunes that they were already familiar with, played in a largely unadorned form. 'Ordinary, non-famous musicians' like Becker could sometimes play something closer to the jazz they enjoyed on record when playing in street-corner bars, where the audiences weren't so interested in what the band were playing. If the audience wasn't bothered, it usually followed that the bar owner wasn't too concerned either, and the band would be allowed to play longer solos, faster tempi and less familiar tunes than

[3] This is far from being Becker's first excursion into sociological description of Chicago dance bands. His first published paper (Becker, 1951) described the same world, but with much more emphasis on the division between how musicians saw themselves, and how they viewed their audiences, rather than the practical reasons for the musical versatility required of them.

[4] This text was originally part of a talk given by Becker at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, in Buffalo, New York, and later published online in Buffalo Reports. The original web-site was offline by 2013,

was the case elsewhere. Becker sums up the musical life of a jobbing jazz musician in Chicago in the 1950s like this:-

'most of what musicians like me played was "commercial" music, meant for dancing (at a party or in a club or ballroom) or as background noise in a bar or club. We played most of the jazz we played by sneaking it into the performance. … Most of the time we played what the "place"--the combination of physical space and social and financial arrangements--made possible. … [Most were] neither totally hospitable to jazz … nor devoid of possibilities for occasionally playing "the real thing." Which means, in turn, that most musicians, playing in the full range of places available, played in a complex and varied repertoire of styles, each its own variation on what the popular music of the day offered.

… it would be wise to guess, in trying to understand the output of any player or group, that what they did in one place affected what they did in another, so that the music of even a very serious jazz group might bear the traces of the less than pure music they had played in some other place on some other night.'
(Becker, 2002)

Despite being in a much smaller city on the other side of the Atlantic, it is interesting to note the similarities between Becker's description and the experiences reported in Chester, both of which frequently straddled the theoretical boundaries between jazz and popular music, and indeed other styles as well.

Hidden Histories: The Trouble with Hit Parades

"hidden histories
The histories that are hidden from or forgotten by the mainstream representations of past events."

(Martin & Nakayama, 2004)

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but the essay was later published as Becker (2004), and much of the same material later appeared in the book 'Do You Know…?' (R. R. Faulkner & Becker, 2009)

Musical activities which fall between disciplinary boundaries, such as the mixtures of jazz and commercial dance music described by Becker, are frequently in danger of becoming hidden histories, remembered and recorded only by a few enthusiasts. This can happen even if the mixed forms are actually more common on the ground than the exceptional manifestations celebrated by the news media or academic press. The activities of Becker's 'ordinary, non-famous' musicians may go unremarked because they don't fit neatly into an academic category, but it can also be just that it's more difficult to find out about them[5], especially years after the event.

For a mixture of academic and practical reasons, therefore, histories of popular music have often been based on recorded music. As Nott notes in 'Music for the People' (Nott, 2002) (pp4-5), 'popularity' is then conceived in terms of 'how many' copies of a recording or piece of sheet music are sold; 'sales' become the main criteria for measuring popularity. Where local music making is mentioned at all, it is often in the context of a continuum of musical activities with 'superstars [surrounded by] servants and sycophants' at one extreme, and 'a local bar band … moving desperately and sporadically between welfare and squalid gig, sustained by dreams' at the other. (Frith, 1983) While these extremes do exist, the real environment usually has more dimensions and more subtlety. In his recent study of hobbyist rock musicians in Brisbane, Australia, Rogers (Rogers, 2013) noted that contrary to the archetypal myths of musicians being motivated mainly by potential rewards such as wealth and celebrity, and considering anything less to be irredeemable failure, most of his respondents did not regard turning away from a full-time music career as a defeat. Their revised idea of a musical career focuses on the immediate pleasures of playing and performing - 'the love of it'. (This coincides with the attitudes revealed by my interviewees, despite the local scenes they describe being on the opposite side of the planet, and separated in time by half a century or more.)

[5] It is common practice for the names of all involved, from songwriter to tea-boy, to be printed on copies of an l.p. or c.d. sleeve, or at least recorded for posterity in the studio's log books. Such records are vanishingly rare for the kind of scratch ensembles Becker describes, as there is usually no commercial or practical reason for keeping public records of who played what, where and when in this context.

Measuring the popularity of a genre or a song at a given time purely in terms of copies sold is therefore valid within its limits, but it *is* limited because of its focus on what Nott describes as the 'moment of exchange' (sales) rather than the 'moment of use' when the music is actually heard. For example, a bandleader might buy a single copy of an arrangement of a popular song for his band to play. This would add one to the total of sales for that song in that week. However, if the band are busy and the arrangement proves popular, it might be played hundreds of times to audiences of between tens and hundreds of people each time. On the other hand, it might be played once, hated by band and audience alike, and never trouble the inside of a dance hall again. Sales figures give no inkling of subtleties like this, but bandleaders and musicians need to be very aware of them in order to provide what the audiences they play for prefer and pay them for. In fact, a remarkable variety of music was being played live in British towns and cities in the 1950s and 1960s. Frith et al dispute record-based (and youth-oriented) assertions, such as this earlier one from Dave Harker in 'One for the Money':

'The period 1959-62 was the deadest phase of British and American recorded song since at least 1956 (?)… For adolescents it was a *desert*. Unless you lived in major city or coast, or had access to amusement arcade or fairground or made your own music, musically it was a *bloody desert.'*
(Harker, 1980)

saying:

'Switch attention from 'recorded song' to live performance and 1959-62 becomes less a desert than a landscape covered with a mass of foliage, from gnarled old trees to newly planted seedlings. Not only were a significant number of adolescents making their own music in this period (including early versions of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones), but they also had a variety of local opportunities to serve musical apprenticeships.'

(Frith, Brennan, Cloonan, & Webster, 2013) p.64

A major issue with recording-based histories is therefore that they miss what most musicians actually do most of the time, i.e. making their living – or part of

their living - as performers rather than through record sales. (Even those who do have success in the recording industry usually begin their careers long before then, and continue long after their records cease to appear in the charts.) (Frith et al., 2013; Rogers, 2013; Taylor, 2013) The Chester dance band scene proved to be a good example of this issue; a large number of musicians were involved, and many were very busy making music for many years, although few had work recorded or broadcast to any significant extent, at least until the 21st century when changes in technology made recording cheaper & easier.

If music and musicians are selected for study based only on how much they record or how many recordings they sell, it would be fair to dismiss the Chester dance band scene as unworthy of study. However, as well as being the most common sort of live jazz many people experienced, local dance bands and the venues they played in were part of the musical environment that successful rock bands such as the Beatles grew up in. Frith et. al. point out that describing the arrival of rock 'n' roll in Britain in the mid-1950s as 'revolutionary' - or a definitive change in musical generations - is problematic, as this arrival took place among a rich variety of other thriving musical entertainment scenes. I would add that the infrastructure (including dance halls, jazz clubs, promoters and booking agents, as well as music shops, teachers and older musicians) that already existed around older genres was essential for the development of the genres which followed. In this I am partly inspired by Finnegan's idea of musical pathways, as described in her classic ethnographic account of local music-making in Milton Keynes, England, in the 1980s. As she described them,

'One way of looking at people's musical activities is therefore to see them as taking place along a series of pathways which provide familiar directions for both personal choices and collective actions. Such pathways form one important - often unstated - framework for people's participation in urban life, something overlapping with, but more permanent and structured than, the personal networks in which individuals also participate. They form broad routes set out, as it were, across and through the city. They tend to be invisible to others, but for those who follow them they constitute a clearly laid thoroughfare both for their activities and relationships and for the meaningful structuring of their actions in space and time'

(Finnegan, 2007)

The vast majority of participants in a scene such as this do not become famous, but they are still an essential part of the local musical network. The next section examines the context for the live music scene in Chester and North Wales, and some ways in which that context affected how the scene, and its networks, developed.

The Environment: Cheshire and North Wales in the mid-twentieth century

Historical Context

The research on which this article is based covered the early musical experiences and influences (mostly in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s) reported by my interviewees, and their own experiences in music (mostly in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, with some continuing to play regularly through the 1970s and 1980s and beyond). A number ceased or reduced their musical involvement while in their middle years, usually as a result of family and / or work commitments, then became involved again later, usually in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s. Some were still performing regularly in 2012.

On a global scale, this period includes a number of major conflicts, including World War II, the Malayan Emergency, the Korean War and the Vietnam War, as well as international crises such as the Great Depression, the Berlin Airlift and the Cuban Missile Crisis. This period saw Britain's role as a major imperial power change substantially as most former colonies achieved independence and the importance of both Europe and the Far East as a trading and political entities increased. It also encompasses almost the entire history of the Soviet Union and all of the Cold War.

Focussing specifically on Western popular culture, the period starts when American jazz was becoming established as an important popular art form worldwide, thanks partly to growing new technologies such as the gramophone and wireless. By the end of the period, those technologies are themselves being overtaken by digital and internet-based entertainment and distribution systems. Jazz-influenced dance bands had their heyday in terms of record sales and commercial success in the 1930s, 40s and early 1950s. The 1950s and 60s were a period of great technological and social upheaval, with changing social attitudes, greater affluence, and more freedom and influence for younger generations, which for many were represented and expressed by new styles of popular music such as skiffle, rock 'n' roll and Merseybeat. By the 1970s the global pop music industry was well established, and 'live' bands playing for dancing were much less common, having been replaced in most venues by

recordings of international pop music stars. However, in Chester at least, the story was less linear and more complicated. As Frith et al put it:-

'changes in musical taste and performing practice are more gradual and complex than is suggested by comparing lists of bestselling records. New ways of making music do not replace old ones but exist alongside them: they do not so much change the everyday soundscape as make it noisier.'

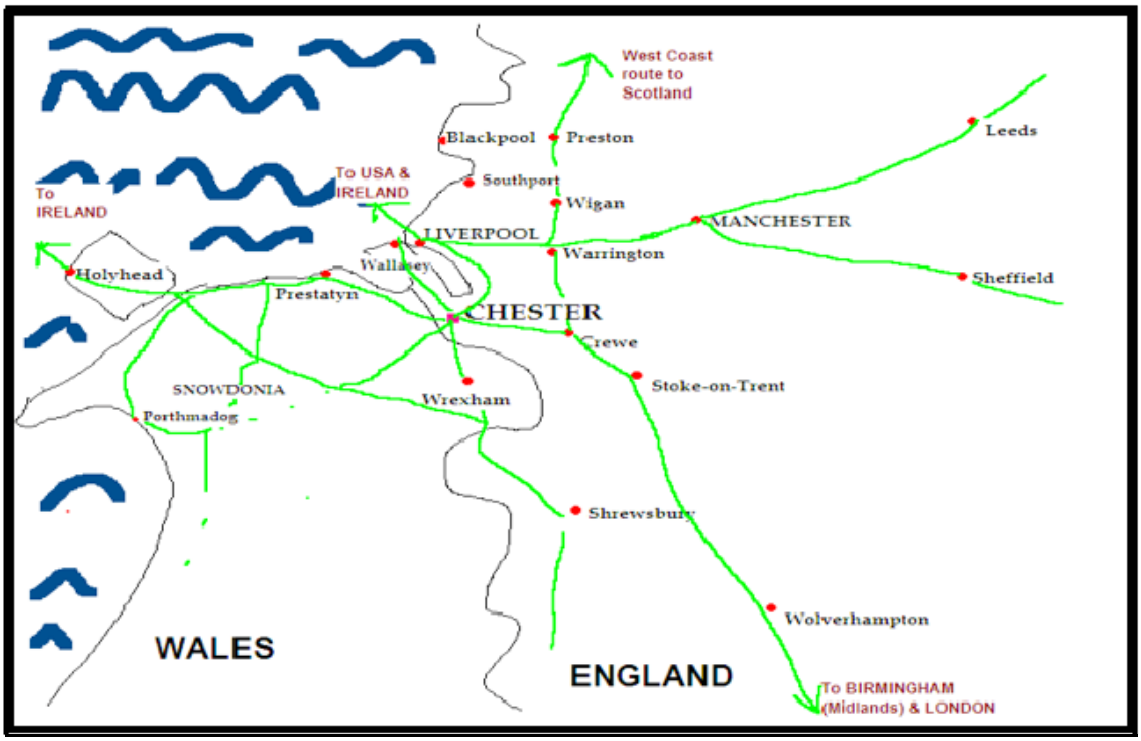
(Frith et al., 2013) pp 59-64

Geographical Context

Chester today takes great commercial advantage of the physical evidence of its history. Sites such as the cathedral, the Roman walls and amphitheatre, and the black-and-white 'rows' are major tourist attractions, and the city's architectural heritage and appearance are important to local authorities and residents alike. It must therefore be remembered that in spite of its historic status, Chester has seen many dramatic changes, even within the last century. These include slum clearances, which moved many city-centre residents from crowded terraces in the city centre out to new estates at Blacon and the Lache. In the early 20th Century, the area around the railway station was dominated by factories, warehouses and workshops, including a large leadworks. A modern hotel near the racecourse was previously an Army barracks, and before the ring road was built to take traffic around the city centre in the late 1960s, the only way past Chester was either around the city on country roads, or straight through the middle on narrow, congested cobbled streets. So in spite of modern Chester's 'preserved' appearance, it's actually very different to live or work in now, compared to how it was in the 1920s and 30s. The city has grown, but in general Chester is now cleaner, healthier, more affluent and much less smoky and industrial than it was in those days. Likewise, the surrounding countryside in Cheshire and North Wales was dominated then as now by agriculture, but it should be remembered that there was more heavy industry in North-East Wales and on the Wirral then, including active coal mines at Neston on the Wirral until 1927. Coal mines, slate and limestone quarries, and steel working (e.g. at

Shotton, about 5 miles down-river from Chester) continued to be large and important employers in North Wales until much later in the 20th Century. The next section examines why Chester's geographical context was important to the development its live music scene.

MAP: LOCAL AREA VIEW OF TOWNS MENTIONED IN INTERVIEWS



Chester as a Route Centre

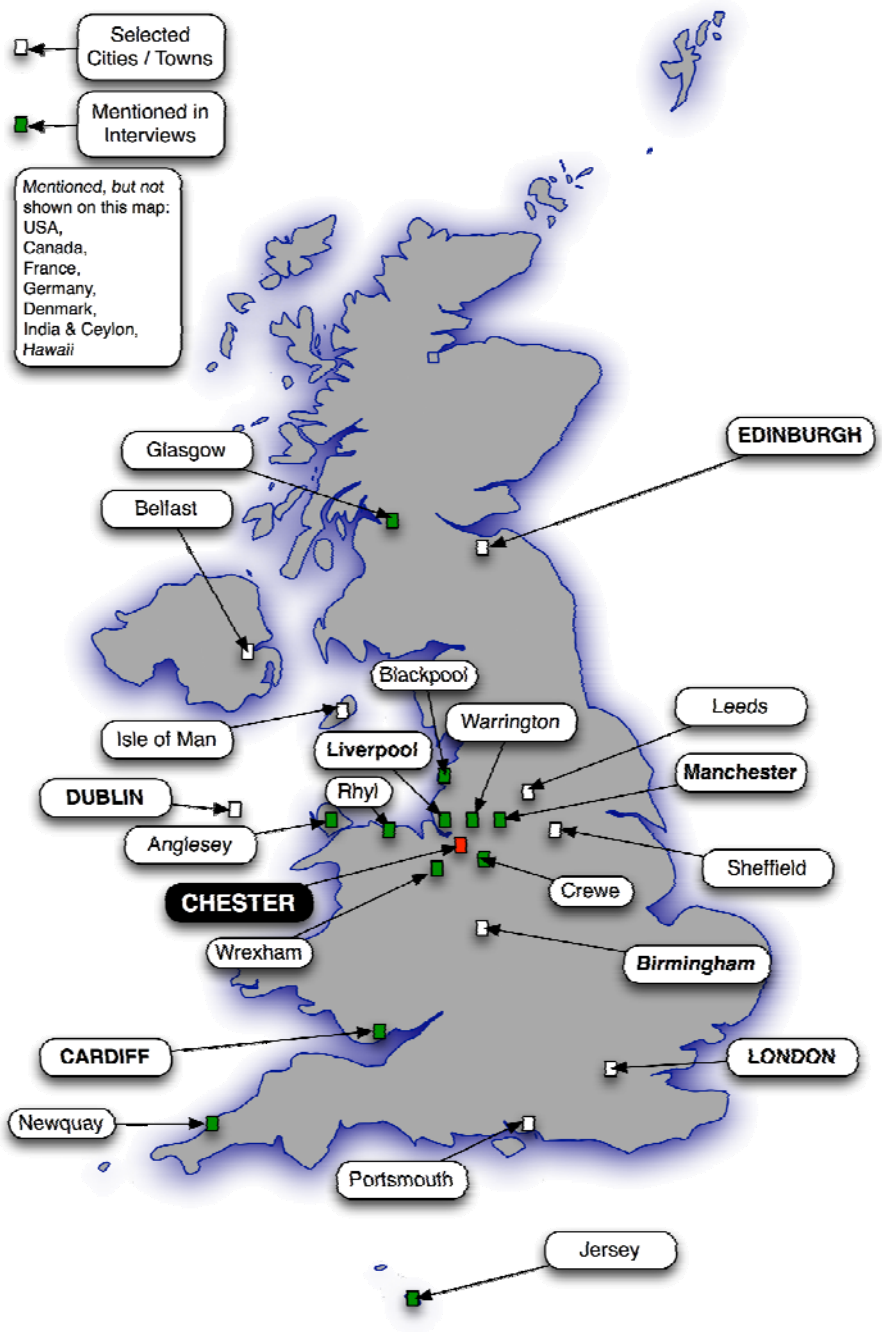
(Southall, 2008)

Figure x shows Chester in context as an important route centre. Note also the border between England and Wales, which is shown as a black wavy line running roughly North to South, starting just West of Chester.
(Southall, 2012a)

Geographically speaking, Chester is an important and long-established route centre in the north-west of England, on the border with Wales and on major transportation routes connecting London, Scotland, Ireland (via Holyhead), and the Atlantic shipping routes (via Liverpool). It has been a prosperous trading centre and garrison town since the location was fortified by the Romans nearly 2000 years ago; they recognised the strategic importance of the location, both

because of its proximity to the Welsh border, and because it offered a port on the River Dee which became a major embarkation point for Ireland. (It was several hundred years before the silting up of the Dee caused the port of Liverpool to become more important.) Chester has been an important market town and trading centre ever since, and later become a major junction for canals and railways as well as road and river travel. While it never became a busy metropolis like London or Manchester, Chester has always had a lot of visitors, both for business and for pleasure. As a result, by the early twentieth century it was unusually well endowed with public houses and hotels for a relatively small city.

MAP: TOWNS AND CITIES MENTIONED IN INTERVIEWS

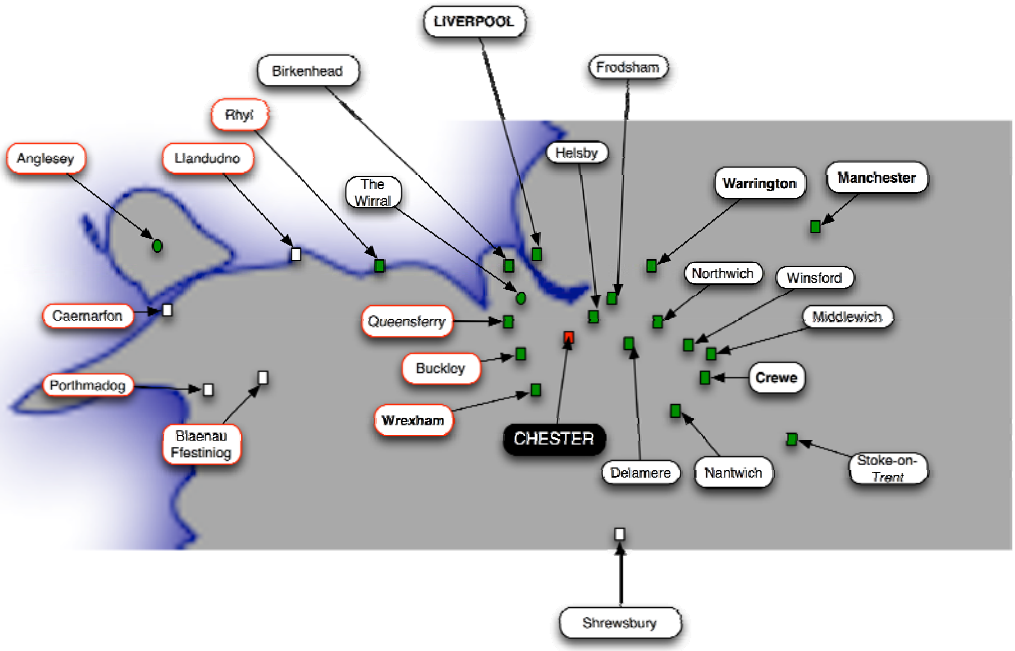


(Southall, 2012b)

Figure 2 shows Chester (the red dot) in the context of the United Kingdom as a whole. The white dots represent other important places in the UK. The green dots indicate places mentioned (in a musical context) by interviewees.

Chester entertainment venues such as the theatre and music hall - and later the dance halls - were on the circuit for touring artists on their way up the west coast, forming a convenient stopping-off point between the English Midlands and either the North Wales coast resorts, or English towns and cities further north on the way to Glasgow, including Liverpool, Manchester and Blackpool. Crewe, which is one stop and twenty minutes by rail from Chester, was a small village until the mid-nineteenth century, but thanks to its location on the growing railway system, it grew very rapidly into a major railway junction and centre for the manufacture of railway machinery, including steam locomotives. Much of this industrial capacity was converted during World War II to the production of military aircraft and other machinery for the war effort. The factory workers, like the many Armed Forces personnel stationed in the area due to the war, all added to the size of the local entertainment market, providing work for local musicians.

MAP: LOCAL AREA VIEW OF TOWNS MENTIONED IN INTERVIEWS



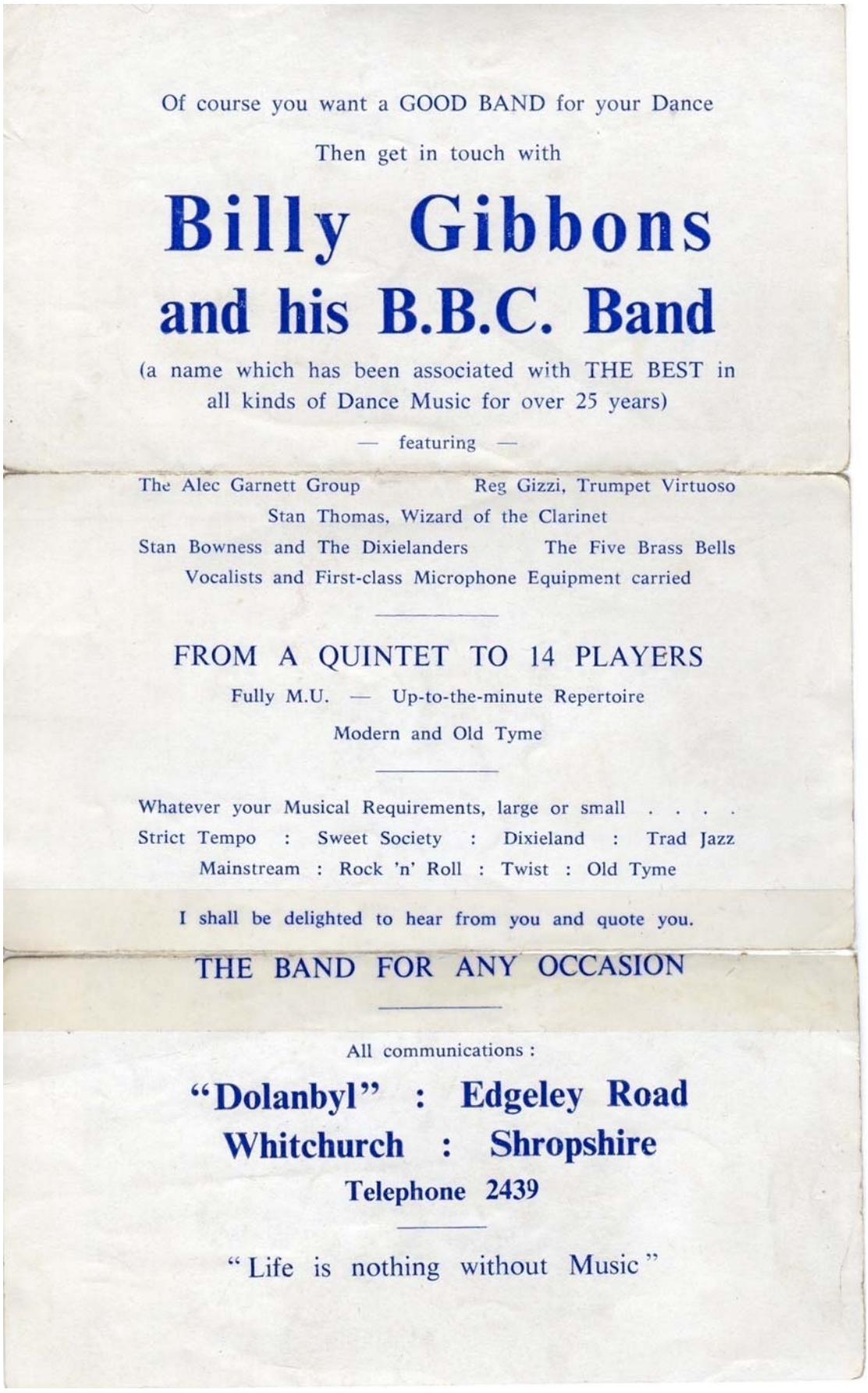
(Southall, 2012a)

The map above gives a more detailed look at the towns mentioned by musicians based in and near Chester. The locations outlined in red are in Wales; the others are in England. Delamere and Warrington both feature because of World War II links to US forces. Working again from west to east,

the places outlined in red are all towns in North Wales; those outlined in black are in England. As for the previous map, the green dots indicate places where interviewees said that they had played, with the regional focus allowing more detail. It's even more evident in this case that the frequently-mentioned locations are clustered in a ring around Chester, and on both sides of the Welsh-English border. Thanks to Chester's location as a hub on the regional road and public transport network, all of these locations were easily accessible from Chester. Most (with the possible exception of Anglesey) were close enough that musicians could travel to the venue, play the gig, and be back home again in time for their next work day.

On one level the explanation for the busy jazz / dance band scene reported by my interviewees is simply that, thanks to factors such as its important position on transport routes, there were a lot of entertainment venues in the area. Before the advent of reliable sound reproduction for pre-recorded dance or background music, any venue wanting such music had to employ musicians, who were usually based locally. The influx of service personnel and factory workers as a result of World War II helped to boost the local live music market in the 1940s and 50s. It should be noted though that whatever the exact underlying reasons may have been, the number of dance venues in the area confirms the business case for a busy dance scene on its own, as the venues would not have opened or stayed open if the customers weren't available. (Likewise, a sufficient supply of willing, available and competent musicians is implied, regardless of cause.)

The dance bands who worked in and around Chester from the 1930s to the 1970s and beyond played a form of jazz - or more accurately several different forms of jazz, augmented by other styles as required (as shown in the advertisement for the Billy Gibbons band below, which dates from the early to mid- 1960s). For much of that time, the jazz they played was also the popular music of the time, but they carried on playing much the same music even after those styles had ceased to be widely popular, especially with younger audiences.



Of course you want a GOOD BAND for your Dance

Then get in touch with

Billy Gibbons
and his B.B.C. Band

(a name which has been associated with THE BEST in all kinds of Dance Music for over 25 years)

— featuring —

The Alec Garnett Group — Reg Gizzi, Trumpet Virtuoso

Stan Thomas, Wizard of the Clarinet

Stan Bowness and The Dixielanders — The Five Brass Bells

Vocalists and First-class Microphone Equipment carried

FROM A QUINTET TO 14 PLAYERS

Fully M.U. — Up-to-the-minute Repertoire

Modern and Old Tyme

Whatever your Musical Requirements, large or small . . . .

Strict Tempo : Sweet Society : Dixieland : Trad Jazz

Mainstream : Rock 'n' Roll : Twist : Old Tyme

I shall be delighted to hear from you and quote you.

THE BAND FOR ANY OCCASION

All communications :

"Dolanbyl" : Edgeley Road

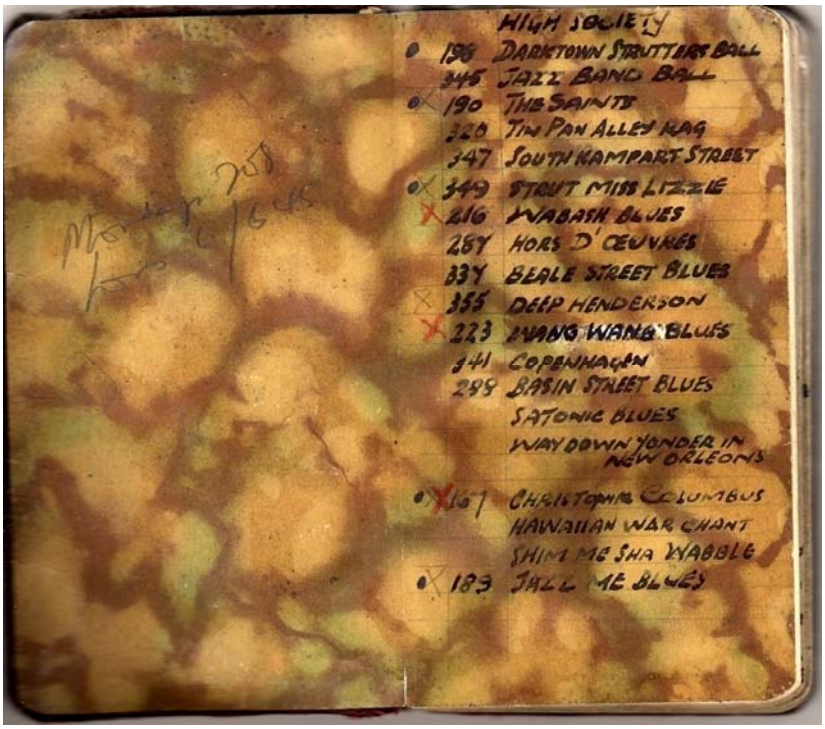
Whitchurch : Shropshire

Telephone 2439

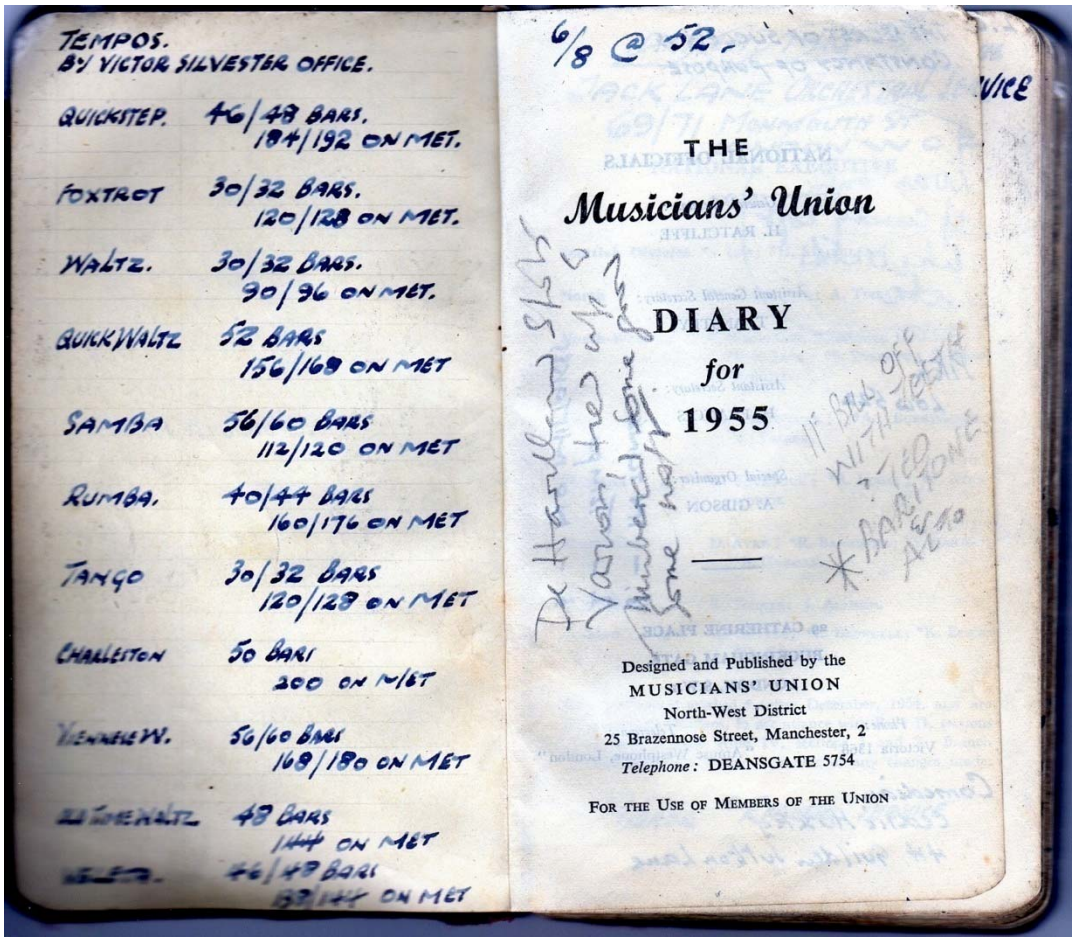
"Life is nothing without Music"

Advertising leaflet for Billy Gibbons and his BBC Band (Field, 2006)

The Gibbons band was not alone in offering a range of styles from Strict Tempo to traditional jazz, as the following lists from Field's pocket diaries of the mid-1950s show.



The inside cover of Wilf Field's 1954 engagement diary, showing a list of traditional jazz tunes, complete with band library numbers for easy access (Field, 2006)


TEMPOS.
BY VICTOR SILVESTER OFFICE.

QUICKSTEP. 46/48 BARS. 184/192 ON MET.

FOXTROT 30/32 BARS. 120/128 ON MET.

WALTZ. 30/32 BARS. 90/96 ON MET.

QUICK WALTZ 52 BARS 156/168 ON MET

SAMBA 56/60 BARS 112/120 ON MET

RUMBA. 40/44 BARS 160/176 ON MET

TANGO 30/32 BARS 120/128 ON MET

CHARLESTON 50 BARS 200 ON MET

VIENNESE W. 56/60 BARS 168/180 ON MET

OLD TIME WALTZ 48 BARS 144 ON MET

VELETA. 46/48 BARS 92/96 ON MET

6/8 @ 52.

THE

Musicians' Union

DIARY

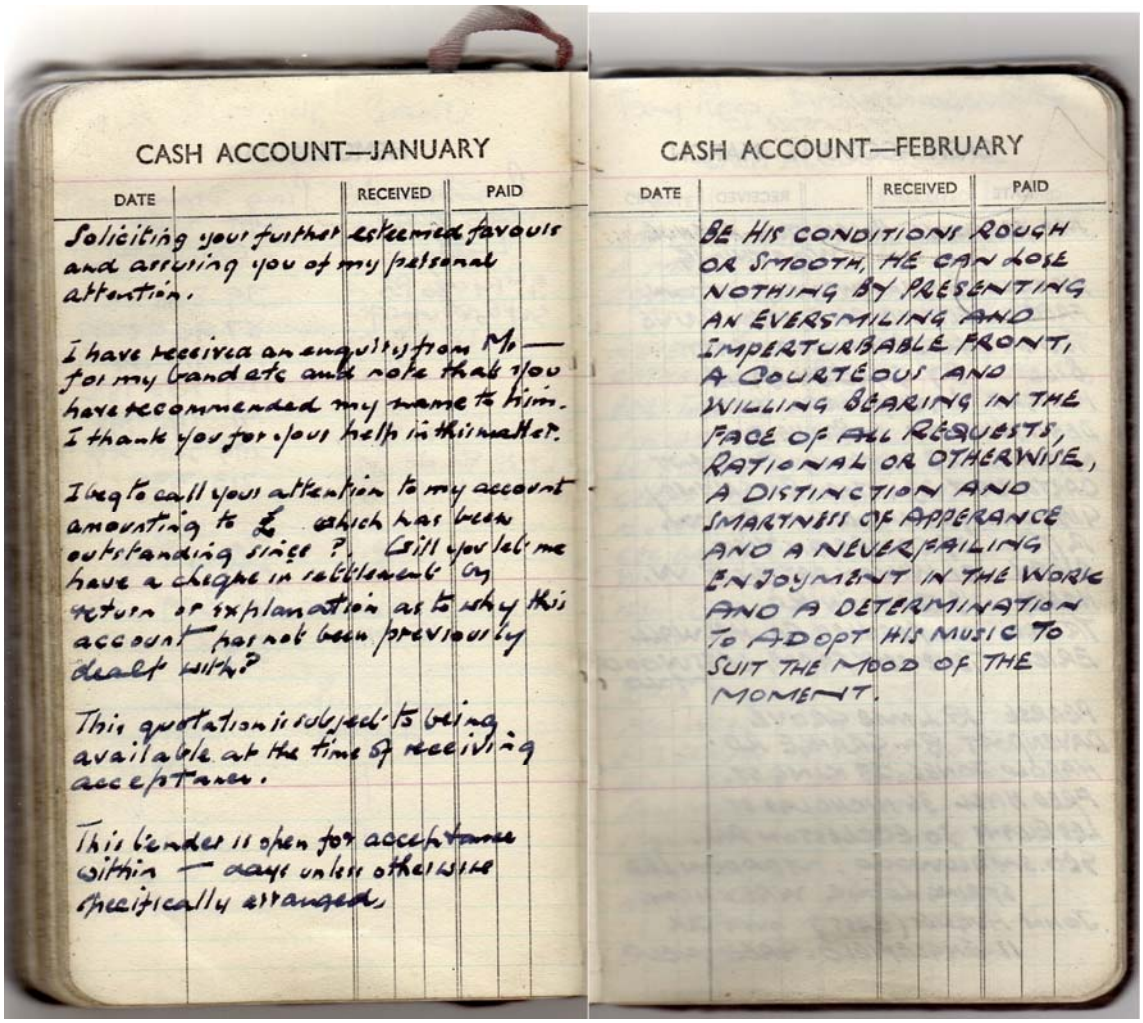
for

1955

Designed and Published by the
MUSICIANS' UNION
North-West District
25 Brazennose Street, Manchester, 2
Telephone: DEANSGATE 5754

FOR THE USE OF MEMBERS OF THE UNION

Standard ‘strict tempo’ dance tempi ‘as set by Victor Silvester’ for Quickstep, Foxtrot, Waltz, Quick Waltz, Samba, Rumba, Tango, Charleston, Viennese Waltz, Old Time Waltz and Veleta, from Field's Musicians' Union Diary for 1955 (Field, 2006)



CASH ACCOUNT—JANUARY

DATE		RECEIVED	PAID

Soliciting your further esteemed favours and assuring you of my personal attention.

I have received an enquiry from Mr — for my band etc and note that you have recommended my name to him. I thank you for your help in this matter.

I beg to call your attention to my account amounting to £ which has been outstanding since ? Will you let me have a cheque in settlement or return or explanation as to why this account has not been previously dealt with?

This quotation is subject to being available at the time of receiving acceptance.

This tender is open for acceptance within — days unless otherwise specifically arranged.

CASH ACCOUNT—FEBRUARY

DATE		RECEIVED	PAID

BE HIS CONDITIONS ROUGH OR SMOOTH, HE CAN LOSE NOTHING BY PRESENTING AN EVERSMILING AND IMPERTURBABLE FRONT, A COURTEOUS AND WILLING BEARING IN THE FACE OF ALL REQUESTS, RATIONAL OR OTHERWISE, A DISTINCTION AND SMARTNESS OF APPERANCE AND A NEVER FAILING ENJOYMENT IN THE WORK AND A DETERMINATION TO ADOPT HIS MUSIC TO SUIT THE MOOD OF THE MOMENT.

Legal phrases (left) and a quotation regarding working demeanour (right) from Field's 1955 Musicians' Union pocket diary for 1955. (Field, 2006)

Field was realistic about the chances of always being treated with respect and politeness by promoters and employers, but reminds himself not to allow this to affect his demeanour:-

"Be his condition rough or smooth, he can lose nothing by presenting an eversmiling and imperturbable front, a courteous and willing bearing in the face of all requests, rational or otherwise, a distinction and smartness of appe[a]rance and a never failing enjoyment in the work and a determination to adopt his music to suit the mood of the moment."

On the page facing this (unattributed) quotation is a list of useful legal and business phrases, neatly hand-copied into his diary for easy access when required. For example:-

"Soliciting your further esteemed favours and assuring you of my personal attention…"

"I beg to call your attention to my account amounting to £__ which has been outstanding since ?. Will you let me have a cheque in settlement by return or an explanation as to why this account has not been previously dealt with?"

"This tender is open for acceptance within ___ days unless otherwise specifically arranged."

Contracts were clearly an important issue for the Musicians' Union as well, if their choice of 'Extracts from Some Important Rules' on page 12 of the diary is anything to go by. For instance:-

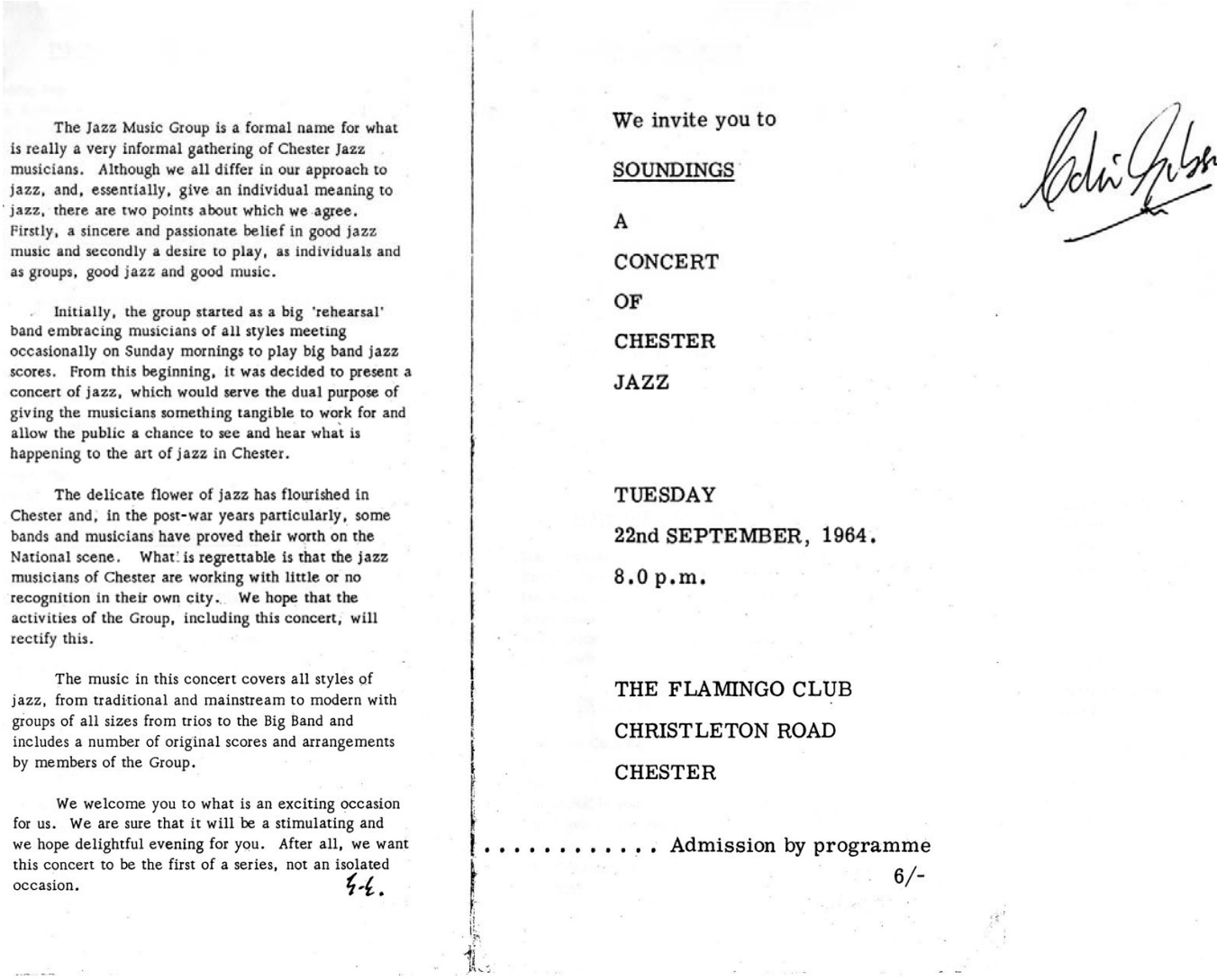
"Rule XX, Series 2, states: "It shall be the duty of the member to give, and receive, a written contract, and a member or members claiming protection of the Union can only do so by producing the contract as hereinbefore specified."

Commercial Musicians, Jazz Purists, and the Beat Generation

With his focus on the business aspects of music and his wide circle of musical contacts, Field is an archetypal commercial musician, and it is likely that the musicians on his lists adopted a similar attitude when they played for

him. Were they always motivated mainly by commercial considerations though? The evidence suggests that many were actually very flexible in their approach, adapting to new situations, and taking advantage of opportunities to pursue less commercially-constrained musical opportunities when they did arise. A good example is provided by the 'Soundings of Chester Jazz' concert (see Image x, overleaf) in 1963, which was organised on the basis of 'a sincere and passionate belief in good jazz music and … a desire to play … good jazz, and good music,' in order to give 'the musicians something tangible to work for and allow the public … to see and hear what is happening to the art of jazz in Chester.' At least a third of the musicians in this 1963 concert – including most of the big band – also featured in Field's 1955 address list, suggesting an enduring enthusiasm for the music itself, with or without the commercial trappings.

As they grew older, and the market for jazz-based dance music started to decline, many of this same group of musicians played for love more than money, or to moved into different musical fields, such as broadcasting or education. Drummer and arranger Tony Faulkner (who also took part in 'Soundings') is a particularly interesting example, as he learned his craft in and around Chester, before moving to London to work full-time with some of the top jazz musicians in the UK. He subsequently took up a post at the Leeds Music Centre, which later (as the Leeds College of Music) became one of the first higher education institutions in Britain to offer jazz tuition at degree level. (A. W. Faulkner, 2007) Again referring back to Becker, it's intriguing to wonder how his experiences in the dance halls of Chester, as well as events like 'Soundings', might have affected his later playing and teaching.



The Jazz Music Group is a formal name for what is really a very informal gathering of Chester Jazz musicians. Although we all differ in our approach to jazz, and, essentially, give an individual meaning to jazz, there are two points about which we agree. Firstly, a sincere and passionate belief in good jazz music and secondly a desire to play, as individuals and as groups, good jazz and good music.

Initially, the group started as a big 'rehearsal' band embracing musicians of all styles meeting occasionally on Sunday mornings to play big band jazz scores. From this beginning, it was decided to present a concert of jazz, which would serve the dual purpose of giving the musicians something tangible to work for and allow the public a chance to see and hear what is happening to the art of jazz in Chester.

The delicate flower of jazz has flourished in Chester and, in the post-war years particularly, some bands and musicians have proved their worth on the National scene. What is regrettable is that the jazz musicians of Chester are working with little or no recognition in their own city. We hope that the activities of the Group, including this concert, will rectify this.

The music in this concert covers all styles of jazz, from traditional and mainstream to modern with groups of all sizes from trios to the Big Band and includes a number of original scores and arrangements by members of the Group.

We welcome you to what is an exciting occasion for us. We are sure that it will be a stimulating and we hope delightful evening for you. After all, we want this concert to be the first of a series, not an isolated occasion. E-E.

We invite you to

SOUNDINGS

A

CONCERT

OF

CHESTER

JAZZ

TUESDAY

22nd SEPTEMBER, 1964.

8.0 p.m.

THE FLAMINGO CLUB

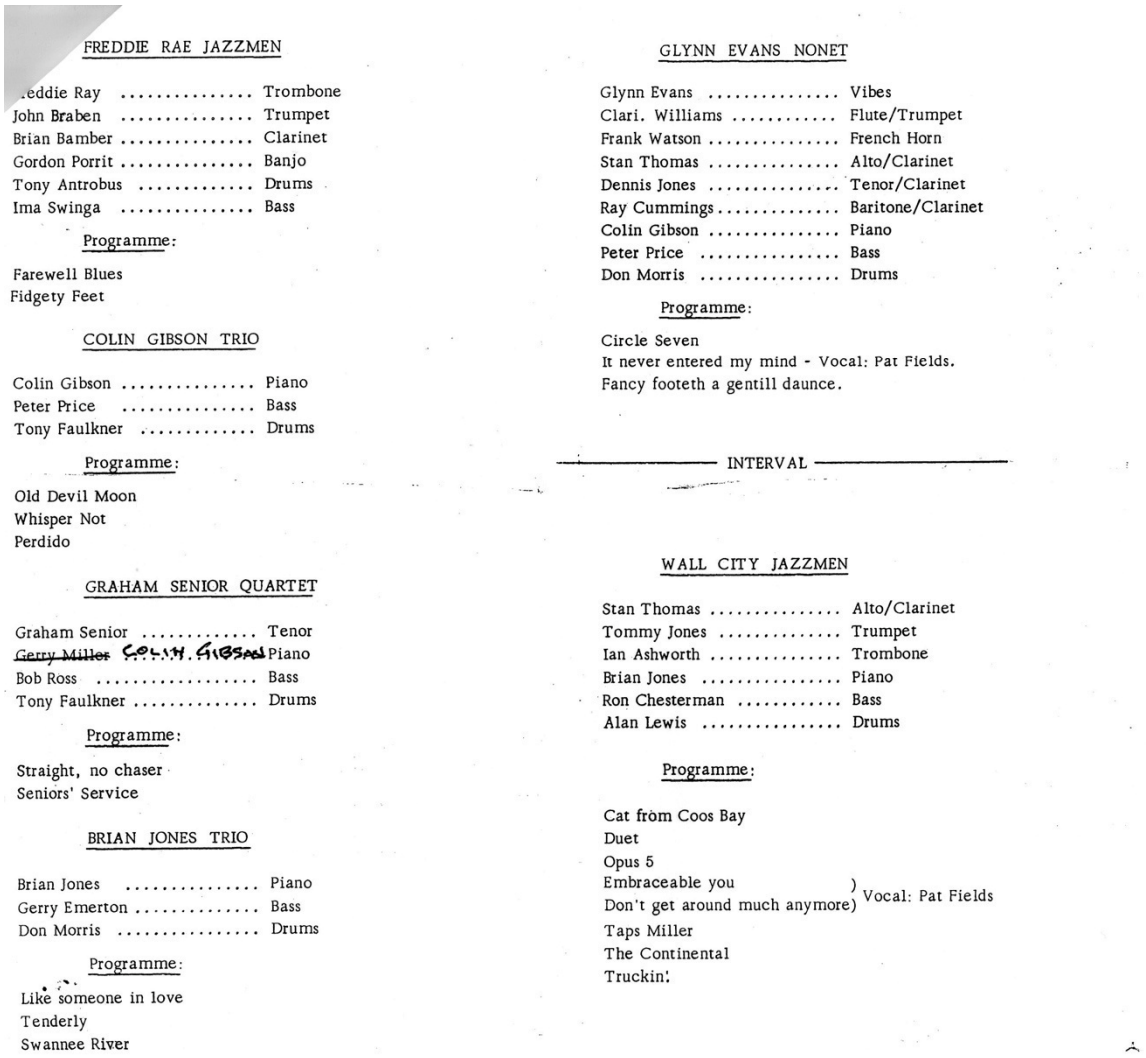
CHRISTLETON ROAD

CHESTER

. . . . . Admission by programme

6/-

Programme for 'Soundings: A Concert of Chester Jazz' at the Flamingo Club on 22nd September 1964 (Gibson, 2006)



FREDDIE RAE JAZZMEN

Freddie Ray ..... Trombone
John Braben ..... Trumpet
Brian Bamber ..... Clarinet
Gordon Porrit ..... Banjo
Tony Antrobus ..... Drums
Ima Swinga ..... Bass

Programme:

Farewell Blues
Fidgety Feet

COLIN GIBSON TRIO

Colin Gibson ..... Piano
Peter Price ..... Bass
Tony Faulkner ..... Drums

Programme:

Old Devil Moon
Whisper Not
Perdido

GRAHAM SENIOR QUARTET

Graham Senior ..... Tenor
~~Gerry Miller~~ COLIN GIBSON Piano
Bob Ross ..... Bass
Tony Faulkner ..... Drums

Programme:

Straight, no chaser
Seniors' Service

BRIAN JONES TRIO

Brian Jones ..... Piano
Gerry Emerton ..... Bass
Don Morris ..... Drums

Programme:

Like someone in love
Tenderly
Swannee River

GLYNN EVANS NONET

Glynn Evans ..... Vibes
Clari. Williams ..... Flute/Trumpet
Frank Watson ..... French Horn
Stan Thomas ..... Alto/Clarinet
Dennis Jones ..... Tenor/Clarinet
Ray Cummings ..... Baritone/Clarinet
Colin Gibson ..... Piano
Peter Price ..... Bass
Don Morris ..... Drums

Programme:

Circle Seven
It never entered my mind - Vocal: Pat Fields.
Fancy footeth a gentill daunce.

INTERVAL

WALL CITY JAZZMEN

Stan Thomas ..... Alto/Clarinet
Tommy Jones ..... Trumpet
Ian Ashworth ..... Trombone
Brian Jones ..... Piano
Ron Chesterman ..... Bass
Alan Lewis ..... Drums

Programme:

Cat from Coos Bay
Duet
Opus 5
Embraceable you)
Don't get around much anymore) Vocal: Pat Fields
Taps Miller
The Continental
Truckin'.

THE BIG

Clari. Williams, Ad
Rip Parkinson - Tru
John Hughes, Freddi
Trombones. Stan
Herb Jones, Tony Ha
Clarinets.

Clari. Williams - Fl
Frank Watson - Fr
Glynn Evans - Vi
Colin Gibson - Pi

Programme

You'd better believe
I want to live
Moanin'
I should care
Sister Sadie
Bags Groove
Nancy Jo
Like Solemn, Man
Gobemouche
Round midnight
Swinging the blues

GLYNN EV

Glynn Evans .....
Peter Wright .....
Gerry Emerton ...
Don Morris .....

Programme

Opus de Funk
Del Sasser
Apex Blues
Daydream)
Lot of livin' to do)
Lullaby of Birdland
Time after time
The Carioca

Band listings from 'Soundings : A Concert of Chester Jazz' (Gibson, 2006)

In fact, part-time jazz musicians continued to find employment in and around Chester for many years after dance band music and big band jazz had dropped out of the hit parade, and often appeared at the same venues and events as musicians playing more modern styles. Some bands even endeavoured to straddle the generational and stylistic boundaries by equipping themselves to play both swing for ballroom dancing and also a form of rock 'n' roll or pop, as in the photograph of the Ray Irving band in Figure x.

The Ray Irving Band at Wrexham Memorial Hall in 1966 (Lloyd, 2xxx)

Irving was still keeping his show band busy in the 1970s. In a newspaper article celebrating the band's 25th anniversary in 1973, Irving described his musical policy as 'to present popular music from the Thirties up to the present-day Top Twenty'. He was also quoted as saying 'Our job is to provide enjoyment; naturally we absorb some of the enjoyment ourselves, and it is rewarding.'


Ray Irving, seen on the left at the electric organ with his band.

The Ray Irving Band celebrating 25 years in business in 1973. (Field, 2006)

As noted earlier regarding hidden histories of the sort described by Finnegan, the vast majority of participants in a scene such as this do not become famous, but they are still an essential part of the local musical network without which those who are aiming for commercial musical success - as defined by recordings or celebrity - would find progress very much harder. The Ray Irving Band provides another example here; in the 1960s his rhythm section included a young bass player called John Greaves (McMahon, n.d.) who later played with the progressive rock group Henry Cow. (Anon., 1996)

The rhythm section of the Ray Irving Showband in 1965. They also played a few gigs separately as 'Free Thought'. l-r: John Greaves (later of Henry Cow), Steve Lloyd and Roy Mack (McMahon, n.d.)

Henry Cow was an influential band within its own sphere, but it is of course the music and history of Beatles which tends to dominate discussions of the musical history of the U.K's North West. Even here however, the barrier between famous professionals and local part-timers was not impermeable; rock 'n' roll and beat groups shared venues and even gigs[6] with dance bands and jazz bands on a regular basis. Overall, there was a strong overlap between the

[6] Wilf Field's son Gordon said in his interview:
"I don't think it was the groups that knocked Dad, it was to do with disco I think. … The groups you'd find might play opposite of you. But they weren't really competition that way; people still wanted the dance band, but then they lost to recorded music on the whole. Cheaper, [and] takes a lot less space up…"

worlds of locally based, part-time semi-professional musicians and nationally known full-time musicians. Likewise, local (and touring) jazz and rock musicians of different ages did not exist in separate bubbles, as they frequently performed at the same venues, and very often on the same bill. Saxophonist Dennis Roscoe (who moved to Chester in later years) was playing dance band gigs around Liverpool with a number of bands in the late 1950s, and was a regular member of George Edwards' band. When the Edwards band played at the Garden Fete at the Woolton Parish Hall on 6th July 1957, Roscoe was there - as were John Lennon and the Quarrymen, and Paul McCartney. (Anon., 2008a) (Brocken, 2010) It was to be a some years before this was recognised as a momentous day in the history of popular music however. To Roscoe and the rest of George Edwards' band at the time, it was just another gig.


Woolton Parish Church

Garden Fete

and

Crowning of Rose Queen

Saturday, July 6th, 1957

GRAND DANCE

Poster for the Woolton Parish Church Garden Fete, featuring the George Edwards Band and the Quarry Men Skiffle Group (Anon., 2008a), **including music from the George Edwards Band and The Quarry Men Skiffle Group**

Across the River Dee in North Wales, saxophonist Ken Morris spent much of his time away from his day job playing with the resident dance band at the Royal Lido, Prestatyn. The band held on to the residency there from 1960 to 1965 by adapting to its environment, providing appropriate backing for acts ranging from Acker Bilk one week to The Bachelors the next. Morris continues to be 'a big believer that you play to the crowd you've got. … If you're out to please people you've got to play what they want, not what you want.' Highlights of his playing career during the sixties include accompanying Johnny Dankworth and Cleo Laine, and on another occasion Dudley Moore. Like the George Edwards Band and the River Park Ballroom (Chester) band, the Prestatyn Lido band also shared a bill with the Beatles. Ken said:

'Well, I mean they [the Beatles] were a gigging band like we were, nobody bothered with each other did they? ... They'd come and do the gig and we just, as far as we were concerned we turned up, opened the show and all that… then took the money and went home.'

At the time this interview was done, Morris was still playing regularly at the age of 77.

While opportunities to play professionally did decline somewhat for brass and reed players as rock 'n' roll - and recorded music generally - grew in popularity, many rhythm section players such as pianists and drummers were able to continue to work regularly, for instance backing cabaret artists and comedians at the Royalty Theatre, or providing background music for cocktails and gambling. Examples included Joe Rowe, who worked regularly with theatre pit bands and cabaret bands, backing artists ranging from Frank Ifield and Dusty Springfield to Jimmy Clitheroe, Gladys Morgan 'and the usual dog acts'. He carried on doing that kind of variety work with a four-piece band until 1981. Pianist Colin Gibson also backed his share of 'dog acts', for instance at the RAFA Club in Little Sutton, on the Wirral. Gibson also played a Saturday residency at the 'Country Club' on the outskirts of Chester for about three years. He played piano with a trio, usually with Pete Price on bass and either Tony Faulkner or Don Morris on drums. Frank Gordon, an organist who did broadcasts with the BBC, played solo piano downstairs in the gambling section, while Gibson and the trio played in the restaurant. Because of Gordon's

connections at the BBC, the trio was occasionally joined by nationally-known vocalists such as Dennis Lotis and Lita Roza.

Conclusion - An Emergent Scene

As mentioned previously, Frith et al described live music in the UK in the late 1950s and early 1960s as 'less a desert than a landscape covered with a mass of foliage, from gnarled old trees to newly planted seedlings', (Frith et al., 2013) and that description certainly seems apt for the varied music-making in and around Chester at that time. Musicians of many ages and styles operated within a complex environment of changing audiences, technologies and social situations. Finnegan might describe these musicians, like those she studied in Milton Keynes, as navigating these complexities along well-used pathways from one venue or musical situation to another. (Finnegan, 2007)

In both cases the analogies relate to the natural world, and I would like to add another example. It is common for tourists visiting Africa to want to see the 'big five' African game animals, i.e., the lion, African elephant, Cape buffalo, leopard and rhinoceros. Getting close to these rare and spectacular animals is an expensive and potentially dangerous business, even for the modern form of hunting (with a camera, from a jeep) as opposed to the traditional approach on foot with a rifle. However, top predators and large herbivores could not exist without the rest of the complex ecosystem they inhabit, many members of which are far less spectacular, but much more numerous. Termites provide a good example: their colonies improve the fertility of the land, which in turn affects the success of the larger plants and animals they share it with. (Eggleton, 2010) Without the rest of their environment – from termites to trees and ancestral trackways - the most impressive of big beasts cannot survive. This applies as much to internationally famous jazz musicians or rock stars as it does to leopards and elephants. All evolution, and all life, needs a congenial environment. For dance bands in the mid-twentieth century, Chester and North Wales provided just such an environment. In turn, the infrastructure, social networks and musical pathways that grew up around the dance bands contributed to the environment in which Skiffle and Merseybeat developed. Natural ecosystems have no fixed borders between large and small, or important and insignificant creatures. I argue that

the same is true of musical ecosystems such as the ones examined here; hit parade data is important, but can never tell the whole story. Forget about the live music scene, and one risks mistaking a forest for a desert.

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